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History of English—Summary of Presentation

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London’s Secret Language—Cockney Rhyming Slang

1. Mechanisms behind cockney rhyming slang

A sentence like “I’m going to walk down the apples” may sound absurd for those who are not familiar with cockney rhyming slang. In Zoltán’s essay, “Peculiarities of Cockney Rhyming Slang,” he provided a concise description of how cockney rhyming slang works. Cockney rhyming slang is about “replacing a common word with another word or, more frequently, a phrase or expression of two or three semantically and/or syntactically related words that rhymes with it” (p.187). Another interesting point about how cockney rhyming slang works is that the words that rhyme are usually be omitted. As shown in the example above, “apple and pears” is the cockney rhyming slang for “stairs.” However, the part that rhymes with stairs is omitted, leaving only the former part—“apple”, so a speaker who uses cockney rhyming slang would say “I’m going to walk down the apples” instead of “I’m going to walk down the apple and pears.” Nevertheless, its’ feature of omitting the part that rhymes does not apply to all cases, for example, “Adam and Eve,” the cockney rhyming slang for believe, are always used together.

1. The origin of the word— “cockney”

“Apple and stairs” and “Adam and Eve” could have been described as rhyming slang alone. The reason why they are called “cockney” rhyming slang has a lot to do with its origin. By tracing back to the etymology of the word “cockney,” we may have a better understanding of how cockney rhyming slang comes into being. The word cockney can be traced back to the fourteenth century, meaning a yolkless egg. Later, there was a change in meaning and form. The word changed from meaning a yolkless egg to a foolish child or a simpleton, with the latter meaning used by Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*. By the 1520s, the meaning of the word further extends into meaning “townsfolk.” It was then in the 17th century when the word starts to designate those who live within the earshot of St. Mary-le-bow. The reason why “apple and pears” and “Adam and Eve” are called cockney rhyming slang is that these phrases are said to be first used by the cockneys (Zoltán, 2014, p.186-7).

1. Reasons behind using cockney rhyming slang
2. As a cryptolect

There have always been speculations on the reasons why people use cockney rhyming slang. A possible explanation is that they may first appear among prisoners or merchants. They came up with rhyming slang as a cryptolect. For example, when prisoners were trying to escape from a jail, they might have to communicate with each other without the security guards’ knowledge. Also, merchants might have to speak in a kind of coded language without the customers knowing that they were raising the price unreasonably. This is when cockney rhyming slangs come as a useful means of communication. However, there are flaws in this explanation. If it is only used among certain groups of people as a secret means of communication, an explanation of the way how cockney rhyming slang spread among different groups should follow, but discussions on this remains little (Zoltán, 2014, p.187).

1. Human being’s interest in rhyming words

Others suggested that perhaps there are no special reasons. Cockney rhyming slang come into existence simply because human beings have long been interested in the play of words (Zoltán, 2014, p.187).

1. Euphemism

While our fascination may be one of the possible reasons, another reason—euphemism may explain a lot about cockney rhyming slang. As a collection of cockney rhyming slang shows, there are a lot of words that covers the meaning of human organs or taboo words (examples can be found both in the PPT and in the paper that I posted on the Wiki-page) Perhaps people are using cockney rhyming slang for the sake of euphemism (Zoltán, 2014, p.189-90).

1. Newly coined cockney rhyming slangs

From the collection of cockney rhyming slangs, it is evident that cockney rhyming is still developing. There is even a website about cockney rhyming slang in which new ones are coined with another month. (“[Cockney Rhyming Slang](http://www.cockneyrhymingslang.co.uk/)”)

1. Conclusion: features of cockney rhyming slang
2. Purpose

There are various reasons that explain the existence of cockney rhyming slang; while euphemism is an explanation for the slangs that designate human organs and touch upon the taboo words.

1. Mostly in noun forms

While there are cockney rhyming slangs for verbs, such as “Adam and Eve” for “believe,” most of the slangs are nouns.

1. Still developing

There is a UK based website that is called [“Cockney Rhyming Slang,](http://www.cockneyrhymingslang.co.uk/)” in the blog, there would be a list of newly coined cockney rhyming slang, and people can vote for or against them according to how creative or interesting they are. This piece of evidence shows that cockney rhyming is not a tradition that is long lost in history; rather, they are expanding as more and more people are using them.

References

Cockney Rhyming Slang. Retrieved from <http://www.cockneyrhymingslang.co.uk/>

Zoltán, I. G. (2014). Peculiarities of Cockney Rhyming Slang. *Studia Universitatis Petru*

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